

WEST WEEKLY

PEOPLE & PLACES

'How to . . . capture that moment when the leaves are full of color.' — BETH GALSTON

Nature as art: Freezing moments of color

By Marty Carlock
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NEWTON — Glancing around her art installation at Chapel Gallery, sculptor Beth Galston had a moment of apprehension: "Oh, no," she said, "these are objects!"

Making objects is what most sculptors do, but not Galston. Up to this point in her career, she had produced ephemeral installations out of light, scrim and mirrors, or of treasures carefully collected from nature.

"I kind of had heart palpitations, trying to make up a price list," she said. She never before had made objects that could be sold.

Last time she exhibited at the gallery, her media were waxed brown leaves, magnolia seed pods and the seeds themselves, each category massed and organized. "Then I started wondering how to preserve these things," she said. "To try to capture that passionate moment when the leaves are full of color."

She bought a laminating machine and tried laminating them. "You have to do it really fast, before the color fades. It's kind of tacky, but kind of beautiful, too."

When Galston stacked the laminations, she saw intriguing transparencies, an icy



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / SUZANNE KREITER

Beth Galston with one of her exhibits at the Chapel Gallery in Newton. Lately, Galston has specialized in casting objects in resin and polyurethane.

effect. A fellow sculptor, Laura Baring-Gould, suggested that Galston try casting the leaves in resin. The artist found a collaborator, Tom Cipolla, an expert in making molds and using resins.

Galston used clear urethane because of its minimal smell and its icy color. "Epoxy is yellowish," she said. "I wanted ice."

The collaborators started small, casting 27 acorns trapped in 1-inch cubes, a little

bit akin to insects in amber. Galston has arranged them like a Rubik's cube; some air is inside, giving the acorns a frosty look. Then she cast the acorns themselves, looking like frosted glass, and added a "game board" of little hollows to put them in.

A larger piece, a column of stacked leaves called "Sycamore Log," was cast in a pressure tank, which drives the air bubbles out, creating greater clarity. Galston made the mold for this one from a slice of log so the outside is rough.

The sculptor realized early in the process that the mold had to be slightly rough to get the icy look. "If the mold is shiny, the pieces would look like souvenirs." Last year, Boston Sculptors showed their work in Paris, and Galston said: "I bought a little Eiffel Tower in a plastic pyramid. But I don't want my work to look like that."

She puzzled a bit about this show. "I didn't plan to make permanent things," she said. But encasing leaves in wax to keep them from crumbling led to lamination and then to resin, pretty solid stuff. Because of a "horror of making objects," she has tried to place them in the gallery in a way that gives a sense of the whole space, a single environment.

The gallery-goer who fails to sit on the floor to view "Wall Fragment (The Gingkos

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Nature as everlasting art: Freezing moments of color

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Fell Green Last Year)" will not experience its full impact. A right-angled wall made of 62 clear bricks, each containing a ginkgo leaf, it is carefully lighted to make parts of it glow, and to put parts in semi-shadow. "In installing the show," she said, "we spent 30 to 40 percent of our time with the light." Galston's earliest art environments were created with manipulation of light, and for her it is a crucial component in her indoor exhibitions.

Making the ginkgo wall was a massive effort, she said. To make a brick meant pouring resin in nine layers; she poured two bricks at a time over a 14- or 15-hour period. "You have to wait about an hour and a half between each layer," she said. The plastic expels heat as it cures, and if it heats up too much, it can warp the mold. If she waited too long between layers, faint strata lines would show.

Cipolla helped Galston make the molds for more complicated forms, such as a crooked tree branch or a spiraling pod she picked up in Arizona. "The molds require all this plumbing," Galston points out; funnels to pour into, sprues (narrow vents) to allow air to escape. The artist decided the molds themselves qualify as aesthetic objects, and she is exhibiting them with the other works.

After receiving a bachelor's degree in fine arts in sculpture from Kansas City Art Institute, Galston became a fellow at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and received a master's degree there.

Galston has been artist-in-residence in local schools, helping elementary school children plan and execute a free-form installation in the rotunda of the Nixon School

in Sudbury and overseeing a permanent piece of public art made by students at the Brooks Middle School in Lincoln. This year, she undertook similar projects with students in Newburyport and Pittsfield.

Galston has also been an artist-designer working with engineers to mitigate the visual impact of Thunderbird Bridge, an overpass on Squaw Peak Parkway in Phoenix, Ariz. The Somerville artist was hired by the Phoenix Arts Council on the basis of slides. "When the bridge was about 60 percent designed, everybody realized how ugly it was going to be, so they said, come along and fix it," Galston said.

The eight-lane freeway intrudes on its neighbors' view of a mountain named Squaw Peak; "this bridge is becoming their mountain," the artist said. She specified curving, textured walls, terraces, and desert plantings.

At Chapel Gallery, Galston explored the sameness and multiplicity of nature. Her crystalline tree branch, cast in multiples and arranged in a repetitive pattern, takes the aspect of ribs or fish bones. Her twisted pods twine around one another like diagrams of DNA.

These natural objects are, she said, "extracted from the natural cycles of growth and decay, frozen in time, leading the viewer to meditations on transience and permanence."

► "Still/Life: Acts of Collection, Preservation and Transformation" is at Boston Sculptors at Chapel Gallery at the Second Church in Newton at 60 Highland St. in West Newton. Call 617-244-4039. Hours are 1 to 5:30 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday.